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Abduction, Exploitation, and Trickery: Examining the Islamic State's Recruitment and Exploitation of Minors in Central Africa

Beyond Material Support: Promoting ISIL Accountability for Atrocity Crimes

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MAY 2025



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Introduction

The Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP) is the second deadliest province linked to the Islamic State¹ on the African continent. Understanding ISCAP's history, as well as its abductions, recruitment and abuse of minors² is a pressing human rights abuse and war crimes issue. Through in-depth background research, as well as expert-led interviews with academics and African regional reintegration and rehabilitation practitioners, this paper seeks to provide prosecutors with an outline of the expansive nature of ISCAP's footprint in Central and Eastern Africa and specifically, the abduction, recruitment and abuse of minors as part of the Islamic State's overarching strategy.^{3 4}

Understanding that the history of the use of minors in Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) propaganda is only one aspect of this challenge, another is ultimately prosecuting Islamic State-linked provincial leaders and fighters who have participated in the abduction, recruitment and abuse of minors. As experts and academics have noted, ISIL excelled at recruiting and nurturing minors into its ranks, viewing the practice as central to its state-building project as well as to 'swell' its fighting core.⁵ As noted by experts and scholars, minors can take on a range of roles in armed conflict, and the rationale for joining armed groups is multifaceted and complex.⁶ However, to date, there has been scant discussion of minors within the Islamic State's provinces in Africa, much less Central Africa, which the paper will intend to expand upon.

It is almost a cliché to refer to Sub-Saharan Africa as the next frontier for the Islamic State and its supporters, but the growth and lethality of the group's affiliates across the continent since 2014 has been nothing sort of remarkable.⁷ During the past decade, the group forged alliances with rebel forces and spurred on high-level defections amongst rival jihadist ranks, propped up five provinces,⁸ increased its territorial presence where weak governance and intercommunal strife lingered,⁹ and continued to pose significant threats to local, regional

- 1 The authors are intentionally using the term "Islamic State" to reference Islamic State central, which has, following its territorial losses in 2019, become more globally dispersed than when it was exclusively in Iraq and Syria.
- 2 The United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict defines a minor as "anyone under the age of 18." The Special Representative specifically notes "recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under international humanitarian law - treaty and custom - and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court": <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/six-grave-violations/child-soldiers/>
- 3 Mohammed, Omar, "The Forever War: The Doctrine and Legacy of ISIS Child Soldiers," George Washington University Program on Extremism, (February 2023): https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/Mohammed_The-Forever-War_February-2023.pdf
- 4 Asaad Almohammad, "ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training and Deployment," International Centre for Counter Terrorism, (February 2018): <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/ICCT-Almohammad-ISIS-Child-Soldiers-In-Syria-Feb2018.pdf>
- 5 Gina Vale, "Cubs in the Lions' Den: Indoctrination and Recruitment of Children Within Islamic State Territory," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)*, July 23, 2018: <https://icsr.info/2018/07/23/cubs-in-the-lions-den-indoctrination-and-recruitment-of-children-within-islamic-state-territory/>
- 6 Amarnath Amarasingam and Tore Hamming, "Cubs of the Caliphate," *The Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA)*, (August 2023): https://cja.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Hamming_Amarasingam_cubsofthecaliphate-1.pdf
- 7 Edith Lederer, "The Islamic State Group Poses Rising Threat to Africa Despite Progress, UN Experts Say," *Associated Press* (February 16, 2024): <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-islamic-state-africa-27c309f74a92429a9ef72d2811956efb>
- 8 The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), Islamic State Somalia Province (IS-S), Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP), and Islamic State Mozambique Province (IS-M).
- 9 Rachel Chason, "Why the Islamic State is Surging in Africa?" *The Washington Post* (December 4, 2023): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/01/islamic-state-sahel-africa/> "The Islamic State has "expanded significantly" in areas around Gao and Ménaka in Mali, where JNIM and other armed groups had been dominant, said Hédi Nsaibia, a senior researcher with the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project."



and international security forces,¹⁰ religious communities,¹¹ as well as regional and global economic trade.¹²

The transformation and lethality of these groups across Sub-Saharan Africa have resulted in an increased presence in the group's propaganda. United States counterterrorism officials have noted that almost 60% of all content is now related to Sub-Saharan Africa,¹³ where there has been a shrewd focus on attacks, as well as *dawah* and *hijra* — proselytization and emigration — by both ideologues as well as official and unofficial outlets linked to the groups.

ISCAP has not just grown in its capacity to inflict violence, but also experienced similar growth in its prominence within the overall ecosystem of Islamic State provinces. What the authors hope emerges from this report, is a clearer understanding of both the history and implementation of ISCAP's strategy of the abduction, recruitment and abuse of minors.¹⁴ The paper will provide the origins and structure of ISCAP, while providing new data about ISCAP's abductions, recruitment, and abuse of minors based on expert and practitioner interviews with those at the Bridgeway Foundation assisting with the rehabilitation and reintegration efforts of the minors abducted, recruited and abused by ISCAP.

ISCAP Origins and Structure

One of the newest official provinces of the Islamic State is the Islamic State Central African Province (ISCAP), which is composed of two separate insurgencies: the first in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the second in northern Mozambique. Notably, this was also one of the first provinces in sub-Saharan Africa to gain official *wilaya* status after the fall of Baghouz in March 2019.¹⁵ The recognition of this new territory was likely a result of the Islamic State seeking to demonstrate their continued global influence. While these two groups are distinct, they have a shared history of abducting, recruiting, and abusing minors,¹⁶ they similarly are carrying out a long-standing strategy that been described as “predatory” and “structural.”¹⁷

10 Tara Candland, Ryan O'Farrell, and Caleb Weiss, “Breaking the Walls in Butembo: The Islamic State's Capabilities in Congo are Growing,” *The George Washington Program on Extremism* (September 6, 2020): <https://extremism.gwu.edu/islamic-state-in-congo-capabilities-growing>

11 “Churches Burned and Children ‘Seized’ as Militants Target Christians in Mozambique,” *The Telegraph* (March 8, 2024): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/mozambique-militant-violence-christians-cabo-delgado-africa/#:~:text=At%20least%2080%2C000%20mainly%20Christians,captured%2C%20and%20several%20churches%20burned.> “At least 80,000 mainly Christians have been driven from their homes, Mozambique’s army has suffered its bloodiest day in three years, a town and an island have been reported captured, and several churches burned.”

12 Iain Esau, “Surge in Islamic State Attacks Threatens TotalEnergies Mozambique LNG Revival,” *Upstream* (January 20, 2024): <https://www.upstreamonline.com/lng/surge-in-islamic-state-attacks-threatens-totalenergies-mozambique-lng-revival/2-1-1585891>

13 <https://www.state.gov/the-islamic-state-five-years-later-persistent-threats-u-s-options/>

14 Jason Warner, “Is the Islamic State's Leadership Moving to Africa? Not So Fast,” *Modern War Institute at West Point* (February 16, 2024): <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/is-the-islamic-states-leadership-moving-to-africa-not-so-fast/#:~:text=The%20al%2DKarrar%20Office%20has,the%20al%2DKarrar%20Office%20to> The al-Karrar Office in IS-S, managing the finances for Eastern, Central and Southern Islamic State affiliates not only highlights the ability of these groups to self-sustain, but similarly their abilities to help provide “financial transfers to its Khorasan province in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

15 Jason Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State Threat in Africa,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* vol 13, no. 11 (November 20, 2020): 18–33.

16 Austin Doctor, “After Palma: Assessing the Islamic State's Position in Northern Mozambique,” (August, 2022), *The George Washington University Program on Extremism*: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs5746/files/islamic-state-in-northern-mozambique_Doctor_August-2022.pdf

17 Asaad Almohammad, “ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training and Deployment,” *International Centre for Counter Terrorism*, (February 2018): <https://icct.nl/sites/default/files/import/publication/ICCT-almohammad-ISIS-Child-Soldiers-In-Syria-Feb2018.pdf>



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

The first of ISCAP's wings is the Islamic State-DRC, formerly known as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)-National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU), which was itself a merger of two Ugandan rebel movements that escaped to the DRC after a crackdown by the Ugandan military in 1995.¹⁸ Following several failures in Uganda, the group fled into the DRC, where they embedded themselves in the local conflict dynamics.¹⁹ Later, the ADF shifted away from its Ugandan roots and towards the broader transnational jihadist movement. The group now has many Congolese recruits and allies; by 2007, "as many as 60 percent of its fighters were Congolese, though the leadership remained primarily Ugandan."²⁰

The ISIL affiliate in the DRC has a history of abductions, recruitment and abuse of minors within its ranks. Even while it was branded the ADF, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had sanctioned the group for a range of abuses linked to minors, including their recruitment and use in combat.²¹ The group similarly was found to be "tricking" recruits with "false promise of employment" and "free education for children," as a means to force them to join the ADF. The UNSC had determined the ADF had "committed serious violations of international law and UNSCR 2078 (2012)." Reports of these abductions from 2001 indicated that the ADF had abducted 440 children over the course of a single year, and used them as "guards, labourers and soldiers."²²

This practice of abductions, as well as trickery, has continued under its affiliation with ISIL. Following its designation as a province, the US State Department Counterterrorism Bureau noted the provinces' recruits were conscripted primarily through coercion or deception, although in recent years it has attracted ideologically motivated foreign recruits from Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, and Rwanda.

MOZAMBIQUE

The second of ISCAP's wings originates from an ongoing insurgency in northern Mozambique, near the border with Tanzania. For the purpose of this report, it will be referred to as Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M). However, the group is known locally and colloquially as "al-Shabab."²³ It originated as a radical youth movement that clashed with government-backed clerics. Al-Shabab's initial demands included "Islamic" governance for Mozambique and denounced the secular ruling party. Since then, they have articulated a desire to "establish rule by a hardline version of Islamic law in Cabo Delgado," their hometown and primary base of operations.

The group gained support by taking advantage of feelings of marginalization and ethnic discrimination among Muslim communities in coastal regions of Mozambique. These feelings were furthered compounded by the discovery of immense gas reserves in Mozambique in

18 "The Allied Democratic Forces, an Islamic State Affiliate in the Democratic Republic of Congo," Congressional Research Service (September 1, 2022): <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12206/2>

19 Warner et al., "Outlasting the Caliphate," 25.

20 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 264.

21 United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of Congo," (December 5, 2016): <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/sanctions/1533/materials/summaries/entity/allied-democratic-forces-%28adf%29>

22 Child Soldiers International, "Child Soldiers Global Report 2001 – Uganda," April 2001: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/cscoal/2001/en/63610> [accessed 20 January 2025]

23 Note that this is not the same al-Shabab that operates in Somalia.



2009, which led to disappointed hopes and more perceived discrimination.²⁴ Some analysts have argued that the insurgency is actually the culmination of more than a century of “heated local and national disputes,” inter-ethnic tensions, and “frustration amid poverty and limited government support.”²⁵

The insurgents began their transition toward militancy by “mobilizing in mosques against established religious leaders.”²⁶ Following some initial, largely unsuccessful, attacks in October 2017, al-Shabab steadily escalated into a rural insurgency. The group’s initial leadership was made up of locals who had gone abroad to study religious doctrine and to receive military training in Tanzania, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.²⁷

In 2019, after just over a year of operating, IS-Mozambique pledged fealty to ISIL, where it was merged with IS-DRC as part of ISCAP. Around May 2022, Mozambique was elevated to a *wilaya* in its own right.²⁸ Since then, the group has continued to demonstrate its lethality, as well as advanced its *dawah* activities in territories it currently controls, which is part and parcel of ISIL’s “jihadi state-building project,” in order to “provide evidence of a form of governance over a specified area.”²⁹

Just as IS-DRC has a history of abducting, recruiting, and abusing minors, so does IS-M. In 2024, the group has used boys as young as 13 to conduct raids of villages³⁰, and in 2021, human rights observers noted that IS-M was “kidnapping boys and using them to fight government forces,” with defectors from the group noting that were “hundreds of boys” in the group, who “behave like adult men, even picking ‘wives’ among the kidnapped girls.”³¹ The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) went on to state that the number of children recruited by al-Shabab in Mozambique was believed to be in the “thousands.”³²

ISCAP Structure

Beyond the general organizational structure (or lack thereof) of these different Islamic State affiliates, there is also variety when it comes to each group’s relationship with ISIL. At certain points, the Islamic State has provided its African affiliates with strategic direction, coordination, and material assistance.³³ Despite this occasional support, the affiliates in the DRC and Mozambique have historically evolved at their own pace and operated with “a significant degree of autonomy.”³⁴

24 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 25.

25 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 284.

26 David Gartenstein-Ross, Emelie Chace-Donahue, and Colin P. Clarke, “The Evolution and Escalation of the Islamic State Threat to Mozambique - Foreign Policy Research Institute,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (blog), April 13, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/04/the-evolution-and-escalation-of-the-islamic-state-threat-to-mozambique/>.

27 Gartenstein-Ross, Chace-Donahue, and Clarke, “The Evolution and Escalation of the Islamic State Threat to Mozambique - Foreign Policy Research Institute.”

28 Nicholas Cook, “Insurgency in Northern Mozambique: Nature and Responses” (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 5, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11864>.

29 Caleb Weiss, “Islamic State expands da’wah activities in Mozambique,” *The Foundation of Defense of Democracies Long War Journal*, (April 30, 2024): <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2024/04/islamic-state-expands-dawah-activities-in-mozambique.php>

30 Human Rights Watch, “Mozambique: Child Soldiers Used in Raid on Northern Town,” (May 15, 2024): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/15/mozambique-child-soldiers-used-raid-northern-town>

31 Human Rights Watch, “Mozambique: ISIS-linked Group Using Child Soldiers,” (September 29, 2021): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/29/mozambique-isis-linked-group-using-child-soldiers>

32 Lisa Schlein, “UNICEF: Mozambique Insurgents Recruiting Children to Fight in Cabo Delgado,” *Voice of America*, (October 5, 2021): <https://www.voanews.com/a/unicef-mozambique-insurgents-recruiting-children-to-fight-in-cabo-delgado/6258648.html>

33 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 18.

34 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 18.



As scholars and multilateral institutions have noted, the General Directorate of Provinces (GDP) provides the structure to these provinces through “a hub-and-spoke approach to the problem of the core’s inability to maintain its previous level of command and control.”³⁵ Through the GDP office, the Al-Karrar office servicing the Eastern, Central and Southern Africa provinces has been said to be providing the bridge between Africa and the Middle East for the group’s core financial and technical functions.

ISCAP

As noted above, the affiliates Mozambique and the DRC were initially in the same umbrella province. Interestingly, even when the groups were more closely linked, any “tangible, material ties” that could have substantively affected either wing were “limited and speculative.”³⁶ It appears that each group’s vertical relationship with the Islamic State was always more important than their relationship with each other.

By early November 2019 though, the two groups began to go down noticeably different paths. These trajectories were in large part caused by the fact that the Congolese security forces launched a large-scale offensive in late 2019, which drove most of the IS-DRC from its main bases in Beni.³⁷ Within a year, more than 800 civilians had been killed in around 200 retaliatory IS-DRC attacks.³⁸ In contrast, the IS-M has not faced any large scale offensives from Mozambican security forces, with the exception of a South African Development Community (SADC) mission, which may start withdrawing in late 2025.³⁹ Throughout 2024, in anticipation of the SADC mission’s initial date for withdrawal, there was a spike in attacks by IS-Mozambique.

When IS-DRC was still the ADF, it was unlike most other African groups that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, since it had no prior connections to al-Qaeda. By the time the ADF shifted away from its Ugandan roots towards a broader jihadist mandate, the Islamic State was already “the premier jihadist brand.”⁴⁰ Even once the ADF had pledged allegiance, it still exercised near-total operational independence, and its activities hardly changed. This meant that the Islamic State’s connection to IS-DRC has mostly remained limited to media distribution and financial flows.⁴¹

Mozambique is a similar case. IS-M “appeared enthusiastic”⁴² about becoming an affiliate of the Islamic State, and appears to regularly communicate with the Islamic State’s core institutions, but it has never been dependent on the broader Islamic State movement for its own successes or failures. In other words, IS-Mozambique’s fortunes have been “guided entirely by its own capabilities and resources.”⁴³

35 Tore Hamming, “The General Directorate of Provinces: Managing the Islamic State’s Global Network of Provinces,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* vol 16, issue 11 (July 26, 2023): 20-27. <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-general-directorate-of-provinces-managing-the-islamic-states-global-network/>

36 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 26.

37 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 25.

38 Warner et al., “Outlasting the Caliphate,” 25.

39 Thomas Mandrup, “Lessons from the SADC Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM),” *ACCORD* (blog), April 24, 2024, <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/lessons-from-the-sadc-mission-in-mozambique-samim/>

40 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 269.

41 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 280.

42 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 307.

43 Warner et al., *The Islamic State in Africa*, 307.

Trickery and Forced Recruitment: A Case Study of ISCAP-linked Minors

The authors of this paper conducted interviews with both academics and reintegration and rehabilitation practitioners⁴⁴ at specialized centers run by the Bridgeway Foundation⁴⁵ in Uganda — where both recruited and kidnapped individuals into the ranks of ISCAP are rehabilitated — the authors found not only commonalities between the long history of the Islamic State targeting minors for recruitment, abduction and abuse, but a shared history of the use of minors in civil conflicts in Africa. Over the course of the past two years, Bridgeway has assisted 218 minors, young adults and adults reintegrate after defecting from ISCAP. The authors were granted access to practitioners, experts, and some of the topline data of former members of ISCAP who have gone through the rehabilitation and reintegration process facilitated by Bridgeway.

Out of the 218 ISCAP defectors assisted by the Bridgeway Foundation, 122 were under the age of 18. Minors represented about 56% of the overall population of the defectors. Approximately 53% of those minors were young boys, while 47% were young girls. Figure 1 [below left]

provides a graph of the ages of the minors who have participated in the rehabilitation and reintegration program over the past two years. The largest subset of ISCAP-linked minors were between the ages of 13-17, followed by 0-3, 4-8, and 9-12 respectively. The age group encompassing 0-3 were minors who were likely born in ISCAP camps or were with their mothers when recruited or minors rehabilitated by the Bridgeway Foundation over the past two years. The authors have chosen to highlight the minors abducted, recruited and abused by ISCAP due to the fact they are the largest subset of defectors that have been through the rehabilitation and reintegration centers.

As the United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict has noted “recruiting and using children under the age of 15 as soldiers is prohibited under international humanitarian law – treaty and custom – and is defined as a war crime by the International Criminal Court.” Based on the dataset provided by the Bridgeway Foundation of minors rescued from ISCAP camps, approximately 87 of boys and girls that have been through the program are under the age of 15. The boys and girls under 15 represent the largest subset of minors in the dataset (70% of the minors under the age of 18, Figure 3) and indicate a

**ISCAP MINORS REHABILITATED BY
BRIDGEWAY GENDER BREAKDOWN**

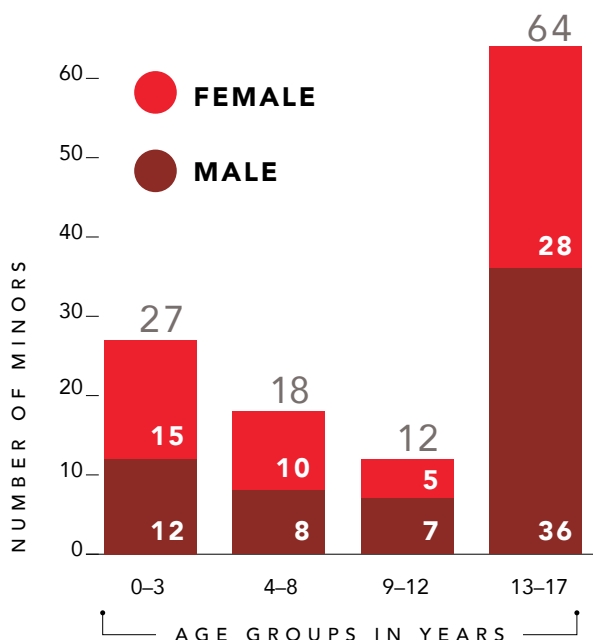


Figure 1 Data courtesy
of the Bridgeway
Foundation

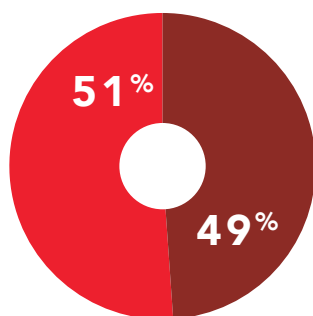
- ⁴⁴ The authors interviewed 6 experts and practitioners at the Bridgeway Foundation, including 2 subject matter experts with intricate knowledge of the region and ISCAP, 2 rehabilitation and reintegration specialists, and 2 trauma counselors working directly with the minor defectors from ISCAP. The interviews took place over a period between November 2024 and December 2024, and were composed of one-hour long interviews with each of the Bridgeway Foundation team members. Due to the sensitive nature of the rehabilitation and reintegration process the authors
- ⁴⁵ The Bridgeway Foundation is a non-governmental organization whose mission is dedicated to prevent and end genocide and restore communities after it has occurred. The Bridgeway Foundation currently manages a deradicalization and rehabilitation center for defectors of the ISCAP in Uganda.



Figure 2. ISCAP minors 15 and under rehabilitated by the Bridgeway Foundation. Data courtesy of the Bridgeway Foundation.

ISCAP MINORS 15 AND UNDER REHABILITATED

15 years – under



ISCAP LARGEST SEGMENT ISCAP MINORS REHABILITATED

Minors

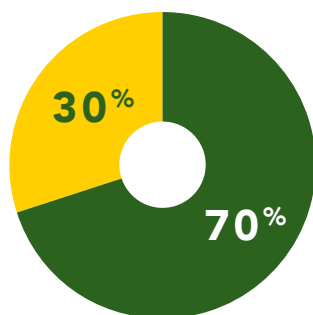


Figure 3. ISCAP minors 15 and under rehabilitated by the Bridgeway Foundation as a comparison to those 16-18. Data courtesy of the Bridgeway Foundation.

specific targeting of those under the age of 15. Figure 2 below outlines the minors and their corresponding genders under the age of 15 who have been through the rehabilitation and reintegration centers run by the Bridgeway Foundation.

These minors were considered “low risk” by the Ugandan military and were passed on to the Bridgeway Center for reintegration and rehabilitation. There are two centers run by the Bridgeway Foundation that individually focus on girls and women as well as boys and men, where

they are kept separately in order to ensure there is a gender-sensitive/gender-competent approach to their counseling and rehabilitation. Where possible, the authors will make a distinction between the differences in experiences between girls/women and boys/men who are recruited and their daily lives in the group.

While all of the minors who have been through the Bridgeway Foundation centers have defected, because of a long-standing amnesty program run by the Ugandan government,⁴⁶ counselors and those working on ideological deradicalization noted that the vast majority had surrendered themselves during firefights with the Ugandan military by purposefully hiding during skirmishes.

This section will not only outline this history of ISCAP’s recruitment but also provide insight from experts and practitioners related to the reintegration and rehabilitation of minors who have defected from the group over the past two years. The authors are indebted to the experts and practitioners at the Bridgeway Foundation for their insight and their continued effort to rehabilitate and reintegrate minors who have been recruited and abducted into ISCAP.

THE DAILY LIVES OF GIRLS AND BOYS IN THE ISCAP CAMPS

There are distinct differences and some similarities in the recruitment and daily lives of boys and girls in the camps, based on the interviewees with the Bridgeway Foundation. As will be outlined below, Congolese and Ugandans who have defected from ISCAP have different recruitment pathways. The vast majority of both Congolese boys and girls were abducted, while Ugandans were either tricked by a family member already a part of the group or promised an employment opportunity in mining or abroad. Regardless of gender, the targeting for abductions appears to be regionally specific rather than being based on gender. Similarly, boys and girls under the age of 18, are believed to be almost universally abducted or came in with a parent or relative.

Similarly, a subset of 15 girls between the ages of 0-3 appear to be predominately Congolese (9 out of 15), suggesting that either the children were born in the camps to abducted women,

46 “Whose Justice? Perceptions of Uganda’s Amnesty Act 2000: The Potential for Conflict Resolution and Long-Term Reconciliation,” African Union, (February 2005): <https://au.int/en/documents/20200901/whose-justice-perceptions-ugandas-amnesty-act-2000-potential-conflict-resolution>



or were brought to the camps with their mothers. In terms of Congolese adult women, the interviewees noted that a majority were either tricked into going to the camps by their husbands who were members of the group already, or by another relative who suggested the camp would be a faith-based learning opportunity.

Based on data provided by the Bridgeway Foundation, girls appear to have either been brought to the camp at a younger age, or were actually born in the camp. Interviewees noted that many of the women and girls were forced into marriages at the behest and whims of battalion commanders who were in charge of the day-to-day dynamics in the camp. The girls were given domestic duties, such as tending to children, keeping camp sites clean, and searching for firewood. Girls were also specifically under the direction of adult women married to the commanders, while in the camps. The adult women in the camps were sometimes used as spies who could monitor government troop positions as well as provide transport finances and weapons back to camps.

Boys, on the other hand, were thrust into indoctrination classes upon arrival in the camps, according to interviewees. There they were similarly given military training, and specific jobs, such as spying on villages, and leading commanders and others back to their villages in order to conduct raids and other violent acts. Boys were typically thrust into taking part in violence, interviewees stated, and were told to do so by commanders and adults that were higher ranking members within ISCAP. Interviewees were asked if girls were taking part in violence, and the resounding answer was no. However, interviewees were quick to note that girls were witnesses to violence.

Girls in the camps, however, were subjected to domestic and sexual violence. Interviewees noted that young girls married to boys chosen for them by ISCAP commanders were forced to sleep with boys and men due to the marriage arrangements. Interviewees who have logged hundreds of hours of support with ISCAP defectors stated that they had not seen any instances of girls and women being sold. Several of the young girls were forced into sexual relationships, dubbed 'marriages,' at the behest of the commanders within the camps. Commanders similarly received 'dowries' for the girls in the camps prior to their marriages, consisting of goods that were stolen by boys or adult men in the camps.

RECRUITMENT: BETWEEN KIDNAPPING AND 'PROMISED HEAVEN ON EARTH'

A significant portion of the rank and file of ISCAP have been abducted, according to experts at the Bridgeway Foundation. Of this population, nearly 95% of the Congolese minors in the group have reported being abducted (39 girls and 28 boys), while another 95%, who are predominately Ugandan claimed to have been deceived with promise of employment or education or brought by a family member already affiliated with the group (19 girls and 35 boys).⁴⁷ Interview participants with the Bridgeway Foundation describe the recruitment practices of ISCAP as opportunistic and exploitative, relying heavily on a combination of deception, coercion, and abduction. While a small percentage of recruits might be drawn to the group due to genuine ideological commitment, the vast majority are either tricked into joining through false promises or forcibly abducted, a majority of which were boys. The proportion of those tricked versus abducted varies regionally.



In Uganda, where the conflict is more distant, recruitment often relies on deceitful tactics, exploiting the country's high unemployment and poverty rates. Recruiters lure individuals, primarily young men and boys, with promises of lucrative jobs, educational opportunities, or religious studies abroad. Fake NGOs offering scholarships also prey on impoverished families. In some cases, Ugandan families are tricked into joining by a radicalized family member already affiliated with the group. As one participant explained, a very high percentage of Ugandans "are either tricked with promises of schooling or a job or they are brought by a male family member who's already affiliated with the group, but they don't know why they're going."

For some Ugandans, according to interviewees at Bridgeway, religion was also a motivator. Some Ugandans, particularly those already Muslim, are drawn to the group with the promise of further religious education. One interviewee stated, "they have these spiritual aspirations" and that recruiters would exploit this by claiming to offer "a proper Islamic education in the university," perhaps in Khartoum. Recruiters also use the guise of religious education to trick families. One source described how a "quack" NGO might claim to run a free Islamic school, exploiting the poverty of some families willing to send their boys and girls for a better education. Similarly, recruiters promise to send boys to another Islamic country to further their studies, without revealing their true destination and intentions. Our participants also mention how radical imams would sometimes establish their own schools as a recruitment tool, offering free education but ultimately indoctrinating boys and girls into the group's ideology.

In Congo, on the other hand, due to the conflict's proximity, abductions are the most prevalent method of recruitment. The group targets nearby communities, killing some residents and forcibly taking others. These boys and girls, many of whom are Christian, are then forced to convert to Islam. Many of those adult women brought by a family member were wives of men who had already joined ISCAP and not told their partners. A vast majority of these women were girls under the age of 18 and were taken from villages in the Eastern part of Congo. According to our interviews, boys as young as 13 were routinely used to assist ISCAP commanders, leading the group back to their villages for looting and kidnapping. As one employee of the Bridgeway Foundation told us, young boys "are used to aid the leaders to show them direction or movement to the villages in Congo. So that's how they get involved in abductions...And it's also used in a way to just make them now belong completely to the group because you have nowhere to run back to. You have led these people to your village. They have raided your village." In other words, the abducted boys were not only engaging in human rights violations themselves, but also became outcasts from their own villages, which they have now helped the group attack.

LIFE IN THE BUSH: 'DOING WHAT THEY HAVE DONE TO SURVIVE'

Counselors and intake specialists at the Bridgeway Foundation noted that the boys and girls who were abducted or tricked into joining ISCAP, were converted to the Islamic State's version of Islam. The counselors noted that there were even conversions of Muslims, whose practice of Islam did not fit into the prism of the Islamic State's ideology. Specifically, boys were typically thrust into ideological indoctrination classes that can last up to several months. Similarly, they are provided the tents, boots, flashlights, indicating an ability to finance those who are either kidnapped or tricked into joining the group. A majority of the boys and girls in the



camps reported poor living conditions, such as no access to clean water. One of the young boys brought to the Bridgeway rehabilitation center had not taken a bath in more than two years, according to counselors.

Our interviewees detail a range of crimes committed by ISCAP recruits, often under duress and with significant variation based on age and gender. Forced conscription, particularly of Congolese boys, leads to their involvement in various illicit activities. Looting is a common practice, framed as taking the property of “nonbelievers”, serving both ideological and practical purposes of resource acquisition. Boys are also forced to participate in attacks on villages, often involving the killing of civilians, regardless of their religious affiliation, as well as abductions, further fueling the cycle of forced recruitment. Within the camps, violence is pervasive, with executions commonplace for even minor infractions. Boys in the camps were often forced to witness or even participate in these killings and other acts of violence.

Our interviewees also paint a stark picture of the systematic abuse and exploitation women and girls face within ISCAP. Forced marriage is a pervasive practice, often involving girls as young as 13. Our interviewees describe a system within ISIS-DRC where commanders receive a “dowry” for arranging and officiating forced marriages between male recruits and abducted women and girls. The commander acts as the ultimate authority within the camp, deciding which woman or girl will be married to which male recruit. The male recruit is expected to pay the dowry to the commander for the arrangement. This dowry can be in the form of money or possessions of value, looted during raids. Once married, women and girls are subjected to sexual violence and domestic violence. They are forced to bear children for their husbands, further solidifying their captivity and contributing to the next generation of recruits. Women and girls under 18 were also expected to perform domestic duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, both their own and those of other wives within the camp. Beyond the domestic sphere, adult women are involved in supporting the group’s logistical operations. They are often tasked with carrying looted goods during raids or escorting hostages back to the camps. While their direct involvement in combat is debated, our interviewees indicate that women are present during attacks, exposing them to extreme violence and trauma.

Conclusion

The Islamic State’s expansion in Africa, particularly through ISCAP, reveals a disturbing pattern of exploitation, violence, and strategic adaptation. This report has examined some of the distinct recruitment practices employed by ISCAP, ranging from coerced abduction in Congo to deceptive promises in Uganda, and the subsequent crimes committed by recruits, often under duress. While a small number might join seeking religious training or due to genuine ideological convictions, the overwhelming majority are victims of circumstance, trapped within a system built on fear and manipulation. The unique dynamics of each province, influenced by local conflicts and socio-economic vulnerabilities, shape the group’s recruitment strategies and the roles recruits play within its operations.

The horrific experiences of women and girls within ISCAP are also clear. They are subjected to forced marriage, sexual slavery, and domestic violence. The practice of commanders receiving dowries for arranging these unions further highlights the group’s financial opportunism and calculated use of distorted religious practices to control its members. Children, both boys and



girls, are systematically targeted for indoctrination and exploitation, forced to participate in violence and exposed to ongoing trauma, constituting a particularly heinous aspect of ISIS-DRC's operations.

Our conversations with experts and practitioners reveal a growing concern over the lack of international attention paid to the evolving ISCAP threat in Africa. While the world has largely focused on the group's activities in the Middle East, Africa has become a new frontier for the Islamic State. This is evidenced by the increasing volume of Islamic State propaganda focused on the continent and the group's strategic efforts to establish a stronger presence in the region.

Furthermore, it is clear that existing counterterrorism efforts are insufficient to address the complexity of the challenges posed by ISCAP. The focus on military interventions, while necessary, must be coupled with comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programs to support those escaping the group and prevent recidivism. The work of organizations like the Bridgeway Foundation demonstrates the potential for positive outcomes, but more resources and international collaboration are needed to scale up these efforts.

When asked about their primary concerns, experts and practitioners expressed anxieties that underscore the precarious situation. The fear of geopolitical tensions between Uganda and Congo escalating and undermining ongoing military operations against ISCAP was a recurring theme. The group's adaptability and resilience, its ability to splinter into smaller, more mobile camps, could further complicate counterterrorism efforts. Perhaps most concerning is the potential for the group to expand its reach into new territories within Congo, particularly Muslim-majority areas, which could transform the conflict into a more entrenched insurgency. The continued rate of abductions exceeding defections serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for effective strategies to counter ISCAP's recruitment and exploitation practices.

Addressing the Islamic State threat in Africa requires a multifaceted approach that moves beyond purely military solutions. A greater focus on understanding local contexts, socioeconomic drivers, and the unique needs of victims, particularly women and children, is crucial for developing effective counterterrorism and rehabilitation strategies. The international community must recognize the growing danger posed by the Islamic State in Africa and commit the necessary resources and attention to prevent the further escalation of violence and human suffering.



This report is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Department of State. The contents are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of State or the United States Government.